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POWs Still Held in Southeast Asia

At the urging of anguished relatives, we've spent years investigating whether American prisoners are still alive in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. We're now prepared to announce our conclusion:

We are convinced that some Americans on the missing-in-action list have actually been held in bondage by their communist captors for more than a decade.

The latest top-secret reports identify one group of about two dozen who are believed to be doing "technical work" for the Vietnamese—repairing helicopters and other military hardware left behind by U.S. forces.

"Actually, there are more likely a hundred POWs still living there," said a key source in the Defense Intelligence Agency. He based this estimate on satellite photos, communications intercepts and human reports. "The evidence," he said, "is overwhelming."

This evidence may be forced into open court by a class-action lawsuit, which has been filed by a former prisoner-of-war and a Special Forces sergeant. They charge that federal officials have violated U.S. law by not aggressively seeking the release or rescue of live POWs still being held in Southeast Asia.

A tale of intrigue and betrayal rivaling the movie "Rambo" could unfold in a federal court in Fayetteville, N.C., the "company town" of the Green Berets.

Affidavits filed in the suit claim U.S. officials deliberately ignored or discredited reports of live POW sightings. One affidavit, by a Medal of Honor

winner, even suggests that the Army tried to arrange the death or capture of the two plaintiffs in the suit.

A much-decorated former POW, retired Maj. Mark A. Smith, swears that while he was serving with the Special Forces in Korea he got information for the DIA from 1981 to 1984 proving that there were POWs in Southeast Asia. The information was gathered "by talking with agents in the Thai military, the Lao resistance, the Pathet Lao, the free Vietnamese, gun smugglers, gold smugglers, drug smugglers and anyone who could provide information."

Smith said he cross-checked reports of about 50 agents, most of whom had no knowledge of each other but who corroborated the others' testimony.

Sgt. Melvin C. McIntire, still on active duty, served in Korea with Smith and also made trips to Southeast Asia to gather information on POWs. "I learned of approximately 200 living Americans in Laos who were prisoners-of-war," McIntire's affidavit said. When he, too, reported on the POWs who could have been brought out in May 1984, he "was sent back to the United States six months early." He was later told that his and Smith's intelligence reports had been destroyed.

The Medal of Honor winner, Lt. Col. Robert Lewis Howard, now with the Special Forces in Germany, swore that he was told of live POW sightings in January 1984, in Thailand, when he "participated in a training exercise which I now believe was designed and intended to discredit the intelligence-gathering activity" of the Korea-based Special Forces unit.